

# Cameras Everywhere

[Eric Hehner](#)

I propose that we mount cameras everywhere, on all streets, in all parks, and in all public places. The cameras should be so numerous that every part of every public area is covered by at least one camera. And I propose that the scenes viewed by all these cameras be recorded. And finally, I propose that all these scenes, both live and recorded, be available on the internet for everyone who wishes to see them. You just visit the cameraseverywhere website, tell it a location and time, and it shows you the scene. Navigation arrows move the scene to the next camera in your chosen direction. That's the whole proposal. This essay is about the benefits of, and objections to, this proposal.

The main benefit is an enormous reduction in certain types of crime (murder, rape, assault, theft, ...), and the improvement in catching anyone who does commit such a crime. If the crime is committed in a public space, the police can see who did it. If the crime is committed in a private space not covered by cameras, the police can see who left the crime scene, follow their recorded movements from camera to camera to camera, and find out where they went, right up to the present moment. And equally easily, the recorded movements of the people at a crime scene can be followed backward from the crime, leading up to it. The ease with which criminals will be caught and convicted is the reason that crime will be reduced. On the other side of that same coin, fewer innocent people will be wrongly charged and convicted.

If you want to know the current state of road repair at some location, just look. If you want to know whether the public garden is open right now, just look. People will find surprising and wonderful uses for the ability to see any public space at their fingertips.

One objection to the proposal might be cost. But the cost of cameras has been decreasing, and it is now or soon will be low enough, especially if cameras are bought in the large quantities proposed. And against this cost we must balance the current cost of crime, both to the victims, and to the community that pays for police investigations and court cases. Just the monetary costs of crime that will be saved may be more than enough to pay for the cameras. And of course the non-monetary costs of crime (lives, agony) that will be saved are incalculable.

To some civil liberties advocates, this proposal is their worst nightmare. They would remind us of George Orwell's warning in the novel *1984*: "big brother is watching". They would remind us of the real crimes committed by police in societies where the police have too much power and not enough accountability. And they would say that letting everyone monitor everyone's movements is just too great a loss of precious personal privacy. These are serious concerns, and I want to address them seriously.

In recent years, police brutality has been caught and punished when, by luck, someone happens to record it on their video-camera or phone-camera, and sends the video to the news media. According to the proposal in this essay, all crimes committed in a public place will be recorded, including those by police. And for those crimes committed in a private place and not recorded, the criminal can be tracked whenever they leave the private place and enter public space, even if they are police. Since the images are available to everyone, not just the police, the ancient question "Who polices the police?" now has an answer: everyone.

There are many reasons someone might not want their movements tracked; some of them are good legitimate reasons, and some are not. I'll talk about three examples: cheating on your spouse, being homosexual, and buying a surprise present.

Cheating on your spouse is not illegal (in our society), but one could argue that it is immoral, or in some other way wrong. If your objection to cameras everywhere is just that you cannot get away with immoral or bad behavior, then I have no patience and no respect for your objection. Or, one could argue that an extramarital affair is not morally wrong, but if your

spouse knew, they would be hurt, and if they could prove it, you could get hurt. To that particular argument one might reply that a relationship based on secrecy is shaky, and the cameras are not the real problem. But my argument is quite different; I won't presume to judge morality or relationships. In today's world, a rich person can hire a private detective to track their spouse's movements, and determine whether they are having an affair. Cameras everywhere just gives poor people the same right that rich people now have. And who would argue that the right to track someone should be reserved for rich people?

Homosexuality was illegal in our society fifty years ago, and it still is today in some other societies. A homosexual had an excellent reason to keep an affair secret. There is no suggestion here that cameras should invade the private spaces where affairs take place, but just tracking someone's movements through public spaces could provide weak evidence and strong suspicion of a homosexual affair. When a homosexual affair was discovered, it could cost them their friends, their jobs, their freedom, and in extreme cases, their lives. A homosexual, or anyone sympathetic to the suffering they endured, might be tempted to say "Thank goodness there weren't cameras everywhere back then!". There has been a great change in our society over the past fifty years. Homosexuality is no longer illegal, and most people do not consider it to be immoral. How did that change happen? It happened because homosexuals came out of the closet; they went public. Secrecy was not their protector; it was their prison. Those brave people who came out first did suffer, but they encouraged others to follow, and soon a parade of gays and lesbians shouted: we are here, we are doing nothing wrong, so get used to us! In an era when we didn't know who was homosexual (because they kept it secret), heterosexuals could believe that all the good people they knew were heterosexual, and that homosexuals were somehow evil. But today we see people we know are both homosexual and good people, so the misconception dissolves. If there are any similar issues today involving activities that are moral but stigmatized (atheist? communist?), cameras everywhere will help to reduce prejudice.

Suppose you are going to buy a surprise present for someone. It's not a crime, and you are not ashamed of it, but you still don't want them to know where you are going. How do you keep it a secret if there are cameras everywhere? Fortunately, most people will not spend much of their time watching the scene under the public cameras; unless you are looking for something specific, it will be very boring. So you're probably ok. But they could track you if they want to, and spoil the surprise. If that's the price for a substantial reduction in crime, it's well worth it.

In this proposal, I have divided our world into public space and private space. I advocate putting cameras in all public spaces where anyone is entitled to be and see with their own eyes; I do not suggest putting cameras in private spaces and showing private scenes to people who are not entitled to see them. But the division between public and private is not always clear: there are spaces whose status is intermediate between public and private. For example, there are buildings whose lobby and hallways are shared among the occupants of the building, but not among the general public. It is quite common for such buildings to have cameras in these spaces, and to make the images available on a television channel just to the occupants of the building. So the general principle is this: the images from the cameras should be made available to all and only those people who are entitled to be there and to see in person what the camera sees. I do not advocate any invasion of privacy.

Google Earth makes satellite images available to everyone on the internet. It therefore provides some of the same capability as cameras everywhere. At present, the resolution of Google Earth images is not quite good enough to recognize an individual. And the images show only the tops of people's heads, which is not the most advantageous angle. And there are public spaces that are covered over, and not seen by a satellite. And there are uncovered private spaces invaded by satellite images. Google Maps will show you street scenes, but not current scenes, and no-one is identifiable. For these reasons, Google Earth and Google Maps do not quite do what cameras everywhere can do.

In some cities, especially in England, cameras already cover an area of the city center. Initially there was a lot of opposition from civil liberties groups and privacy advocates. But after a couple of years experience, the crime rate dropped so much that all skeptics were convinced. The people of those cities do not want to go back to the days before their cameras. But the images from these cameras are available only to the police, not to the general public. Without public access, the problem of crime by police is not solved, and there are no other benefits.

Wearable cameras, or small cameras that are attached to one's shirt or jacket, may become popular. They will provide some of the benefit of the cameraseverywhere proposal, when they happen to be at the right place at the right time. But they do not cover all public areas, and they invade some private areas. They do not make their images accessible to everyone, nor are they navigable in the way that fixed-location cameras are. They are not an adequate alternative.

There is already an amazing amount of information instantly accessible to everyone on the internet. Information can be used for good or ill. In most people's opinion, the good uses that flow from easy access to so much information outweigh the bad uses by a lot; we would never vote to abolish the internet. The proposal in this essay is just to use the internet to provide everyone with easy access to certain information, the scene in all public places, that they already have a right to see. I cannot guess what all the uses will be. I guess that some uses will be good and some bad. And I expect that the good will greatly outweigh the bad.

[other essays](#)